

California State University, San Bernardino

**CSUSB ScholarWorks**

---

Theses Digitization Project

John M. Pfau Library

---

2003

## **Coparenting/Divorce education: A program evaluation**

Sandra Kay Maline

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Maline, Sandra Kay, "Coparenting/Divorce education: A program evaluation" (2003). *Theses Digitization Project*. 2277.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/2277>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

COPARENTING/DIVORCE EDUCATION:  
A PROGRAM EVALUATION

---

A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

---

by  
Sandra Kay Maline

June 2003

COPARENTING/DIVORCE EDUCATION:

A PROGRAM EVALUATION

---


A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---


by  
Sandra Kay Maline


June 2003

Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Janet Chang, Faculty Supervisor  
Social Work

5/21/03  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Leslie Herold, Program Director  
Solutions for Families, Inc.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,  
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

## ABSTRACT

The study conducted sought to assess the effectiveness of an established divorce education program in reducing parental conflict and increasing cooperative coparenting relationships amongst former spouses, and whether the program was presented in a format that met high standards of participant satisfaction. This project represents the first systematic and independent evaluation of the divorce education program developed and implemented by Solutions for Families. The data analysis was conducted utilizing a quantitative pretest/posttest design to compare outcomes of thirty-three respondents. The overall findings of the research suggest that the divorce education program is effective in reducing interparental conflict, improving cooperation between coparents and reducing parental triangulating behavior. In addition, the program was found to meet high standards of participant satisfaction.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I want to thank the Solutions for Families staff for introducing me to divorce education and allowing me to evaluate their program. I am especially grateful to Dr. Leslie Harold, Christina Kanaly, and Anita Williams for without your kindness and assistance this project would have been possible. I also want to express my gratitude to Cynthia Huggard and Pamela Keyes for being patient with my often times unexpected interruptions in their daily routines as I collected the data for this project.

I also want to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Janet Chang, for her guidance and encouraging words as the work on this project progressed and at last came to fruition.

Last but not least I must express my appreciation for the help provided me by Tim Thelander. Thank you kind sir for the hours you allowed me to pepper you with questions about formatting my thesis just so. I am ever grateful for your assistances and suggestions.

## DEDICATION

For my grandchildren, Zachary Cook, Kalie Cook, and Emily and Hanna Joy Cook. You are my loves and my delight. And for my loving and devoted companions, Theadore, Madeline and little Sidney. You are my sunshine and my joy.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
Problem Statement .....	1
Purpose of the Study .....	4
Significance of the Project for Social Work .....	7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction .....	9
Consequences of Parental Conflict .....	9
Divorce Education Program Evaluations .....	14
Divorce Education Program Components .....	23
Guiding Theory .....	26
Summary .....	27
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	
Introduction .....	29
Study Design .....	29
Sampling .....	32
Data Collection and Instruments .....	33
Procedures .....	37
Protection of Human Subjects .....	38
Data Analysis .....	40
Summary .....	41

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction .....	42
Presentation of the Findings .....	42
Pretest/Posttest Frequencies .....	46
t-Tests .....	66
Overall Program Evaluation .....	73
Summary .....	75

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction .....	76
Discussion .....	76
Limitations .....	79
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research .....	80
Conclusions .....	82

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE .....	83
APPENDIX B: ORAL INFORMED CONSENT .....	92
APPENDIX C: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT .....	94
APPENDIX D: AGENCY LETTER .....	96
REFERENCES .....	98



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents .....	43
Table 2.	Parenting Practices of Respondents .....	47
Table 3.	Quality of Respondents Coparenting Relationships .....	50
Table 4.	Post Marital Conflict Index of Respondents .....	52
Table 5.	Quality of Parent Relationship with Former Spouse: Frequency of Conflict of Respondents .....	54
Table 6.	Quality of Parent Relationship with Former Spouse: Frequency of Support of Respondents .....	58
Table 7.	Respondents' Rating of the Program's Structure .....	62
Table 8.	Respondents' Rating of the Program's Helpfulness .....	65
Table 9.	Quality of Coparental Relationships, Conflict Measures, and Parenting Practices of Respondents by Gender .....	68
Table 10.	Quality of Respondents' Coparenting Relationship .....	69
Table 11.	Post Marital Conflict Scores of Respondents .....	69
Table 12.	Quality of Respondents Relationship with Former Spouse Subscale .....	70
Table 13.	Respondents' Parenting Practices .....	72
Table 14.	Respondents' Overall Program Evaluation .....	73

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Divorce education programs have become an increasingly common and often court mandated intervention aimed at assisting divorcing parents moderate the effects of divorce on children. Programs of this kind may serve a vital function in promoting cooperative parenting, which is of particular importance given the recent research indicating that the continuing relationship between divorcing parents is a critical factor in children's postdivorce adjustment (Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Jekielek, 1998; Kelly, 2000). In this chapter the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the project for social work are presented and discussed.

#### Problem Statement

It is common knowledge that today approximately one half of all marriages end in divorce (Kreider & Fields, 2002). Moreover, experts predict that anywhere from one third to 70% of today's children under the age of 18 will experience the divorce of their parents and/or spend time in a single-parent household, Bradburn-Stem and Morley (as cited in Bussey, 1998). We have some understanding as to what the implications are in regards to divorcing couples,

but many are less aware of what these numbers mean in terms of the ramifications for the children of divorcing parents. What are the implications of this high divorce rate trend for the children?

The impact of divorce on children has been the focus of considerable research over the last 30 years. At one time, the divorce itself was deemed to be the detrimental factor affecting the child's well being. According to the more recent divorce research, however, findings now suggest that there are specific parental factors that contribute to making the marital disruption much more harmful than the event itself. Specifically, as Shifflett and Cummings (1999) have found, continuing interparental conflict tends to negatively impact children even after the divorce and prevents parents from developing effective coparenting relationships.

A common conclusion among divorce education researchers is this: if the divorce is not handled well, the children can suffer profoundly. Children caught in the crossfire of their parents' acrimony often suffer developmental difficulties, including emotional and behavioral problems. In general, children of divorce are at risk for a wide range of adjustment problems and "do worse on average" because their parents are more likely to

engage in parental conflict (Jekielek, 1998, p. 905). Hetherington and Johnston found clinically significant mental health problems--as much as 300% higher--in children from divorced families than children from intact families (as cited in Shifflett & Cummings 1999). Amato and Keith (1991) also found that children experiencing a divorce with high levels of parental conflict often show such symptoms as aggression, regression to immature behaviors, depression, failing academic achievement, and conflict with one or both parents.

It is important to understand that divorcing parents can substantially reduce the probability that their children will experience the difficulties presented above. If parents can, as Bussey (1998) suggests, be influenced to change their behaviors, then lasting negative outcomes for the children can be prevented to a great degree. In other words, the damage being done to children of divorce is preventable if parents can learn to avoid conflict, at least in front of their children.

As a result of the more recent divorce research findings and recommendations from divorce researchers, new interventions have been developed and implemented in an attempt to alleviate many of the damaging effects of high-conflict divorce on children. Mediation has long been

mandatory in many states where any child related matters are contested. Now a relatively new intervention, coparenting classes or divorce education programs, has increasingly become the trend. States such as Utah, Connecticut, Colorado, and Virginia as well as certain counties in Indiana, Vermont, Ohio, California, and Virginia require parents to attend divorce education classes or seminars before the Court will issue permanent custody orders. The primary goal of many of these programs is to help the ex-spouses or soon to be ex-spouses improve their interaction styles and to reduce strife in order to concentrate on the needs of their children.

With over one million children each year likely to experience or suffer the divorce of their parents, finding an effective intervention to help the parents and children cope with the stressors of divorce is critical. Divorce education programs are becoming increasingly common; yet, there has been little research to demonstrate the positive effects for participants.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a divorce education program provided by Solutions for Families, in San Bernardino, California.

This program was designed to reduce parental conflict and help parents establish a cooperative/coparenting relationship.

As noted above, divorce education or coparenting classes may be one of the most effective means for reducing parental conflict and augmenting children's adjustment to divorce. Most often such programs include psycho-educational components to educate parents about the effects of divorce and interparental conflict on children. At times programs include skills training, such as effective communication and negotiation techniques, as well as presenting some dos and don'ts with children.

The effectiveness of many of these programs remains to be determined via formal evaluation and documentation. Prior to this study the program offered by Solutions for Families had not been formally evaluated, although attempts had been made to do so. The time consuming nature of the evaluation process and the limited staff resources have prevented the organization from completing its own program evaluation.

Specifically, this study evaluates the program's effectiveness in: (a) teaching parents coparenting skills to help them reduce interparental conflicts and establish a businesslike relationship for the sake of their

children, (b) changing parents' behaviors so that children are not exposed to, or put in the middle of, parental conflicts, and (c) providing parent education in a format that meets high standards for participant satisfaction. It was assumed that improved child adjustment would follow if the program were found to be effective.

This study has been an important first step in the program evaluation progress. It shows the program's effectiveness in making statically significant improvements in the treatment group. In particular, the study attempted to address program usefulness along the lines of participation and level of achievement that matches the program's implicit/explicit goals.

As the initial evaluation of this program, a treatment group only, pre-experimental design was utilized. Given the limited time frame and the primary objectives of the current study, one of the most simple and common pretest/posttest designs was utilized to determine whether participants improved on relevant dependent measures. A quantitative approach was used in the study in an effort to determine statistically significant outcomes as a result of participation in the program.

introduce legislation to mandate educational programs for divorcing parents in the state of California or elsewhere.

On a practice level, the research results could be used to encourage other agencies to implement the divorce education programs demonstrating the greatest effectiveness in addressing the needs of their divorcing clients and their children. In addition, the research findings will likely be used by family law judges, attorneys, and mediators to encourage, or require parents to attend divorce education programs, particularly when voluntary settlements have not been forthcoming and/or seem unlikely. In some instances family law judges are making this a requirement for parents who are unable to reach an agreement regarding child-centered matters when mediation attempts fail or relitigation is ongoing.

Finally, the results will likely be used to provide direction to mental health professionals in terms of presenting empirically supported interventions for treating divorcing parents and their children. More precisely, the finding may be used to educate therapists on effective techniques for counseling divorcing parents on ways in which they can work cooperatively on behalf of their children.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In this section a review of a range of divorce literature is presented. The research presented below provides the reader with some insight into the following areas: 1) the consequences of parental conflict on children and some of the common characteristics of parental conflict, 2) divorce education program evaluations 3) components of effective parent education programs. In the final section, the guiding theory for this project is presented and discussed.

#### Consequences of Parental Conflict

There is a plethora of research available regarding divorce that covers a wide range of sub-topics. One of the more recent areas of concern, as introduced above, focuses on the harmful effects of divorce, particularly inter-parental problems and open conflict on children. Although some of the research presented below encompasses studies which have attempted to determine factors that promote children's adjustment to divorce and not coparenting or divorce education per se, most researchers conclude their articles by recommending these kinds of

programs to help minimize the negative impact of parental divorce on children.

Rowe and Hong (1996) studied the importance of nonresident parents' contact with their children to determine if continued father involvement alleviated or exacerbated children's adjustment to their parent's divorce. They obtained their data from a national sample that included 225 divorced women with children. The results show that children's behavior problems are more associated with parental conflict than with higher levels of parental/father's involvement.

Although the findings may be biased, given that they are based solely on the mother's reports of the father's behaviors, they nonetheless shed insight, since parental conflict often takes place at contact, when the children are exchanged between parents. Children often witness first hand their parent's argumentative and hostile behaviors and they often model what they observe.

The authors concluded by pointing out the need for structured mediation programs, community based educational workshops aimed at "*promoting cooperative coparenting after divorce*" (Rowe & Hong, 1996, p. 339, italics added).

Another rather new area of divorce research attempts to determine why non-custodial fathers disengage from

their children following separation and divorce. This article is presented to illustrate the range of harmful behaviors that parental conflict encompasses and the effects of both on children and fathers. Lehr and MacMillan (2001) employed a focus group methodology in the form of a group interview to obtain their data. The sample includes 18 participants recruited from an outreach program for single fathers.

Although their sample is small ( $n = 18$ ) and not broadly representative (the mean age is 22.3 years and the men are from low SES) their findings provide some insight as to why fathers often eventually drop out of their children's lives, i.e., continued dissension with the ex-partners.

Lehr and MacMillan's (2001) findings illustrate some of the common behaviors in parental conflict, such as:

Denial of access, the children not being ready, or available for the visits, or changing the arrangement at the last minute, confrontation or conflict with the father at the time of the visit, criticism of the father to the children, Kruk. (as cited in Lehr & MacMillan, 2001, p. 374)

It is important to note that many children display various negative outcomes as a result of the diminished presence and involvement of a previously competent parent in their lives, including depression, poor school

performance and post divorce adjustment difficulties (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). Children in the study presented above may suffer doubly from the loss of a regular presence of their fathers as well as the continued conflict between their parents.

Importantly, the fathers in this study recognize the importance of a positive relationship with their ex-partner, "it is a goal towards which they all strive...for the sake of their children" (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001, p. 378).

Gentry (1997) contributes to our understanding of the issues by providing an overview of the more recent body of literature on divorce. Specifically, she highlights research findings in two areas of importance to this study: 1) the negative impact of divorce on children and 2) the extent to which divorce education minimizes the negative consequences children may experience as a result of their parent's divorce. She finds ample evidence to support the assertion that children are harmed by habitual displays of parental combativeness and game playing manipulations.

Gentry (1997) illustrates what parental conflict tends to look like. Parents, she finds, often use their children as go betweens in their version of the games like

*I Spy*, *The Messenger*, and *Tug of War*; and they often badmouth the other parent to, or in the presence of, the child, or they may attempt to brainwash the child or get the child to favor them--all examples of triangulating behaviors.

As far as the results regarding the effectiveness of divorce education programs, Gentry (1997) found mixed results, from relatively low effectiveness, to moderately high levels, to somewhere in between. However, one finding seems particularly relevant to the present study, namely that parents reporting high levels of conflict seemed to benefit most.

Kelly (2000) provides meta-analyses of the divorce research of the past decade. Her methods involved surveying key empirical studies from 1990 to 1999 to determine the impact of marital conflict, parental violence, and divorce on the psychological adjustment of children, adolescents, and young adults. In addition, the author presents a description of the newer divorce interventions, like divorce education programs in her paper.

The significant and relevant findings of her research include: "marital conflict is a more important predictor of child adjustment than is divorce itself and

interventions for divorcing families...offer positive alternatives to families going through the divorce process" (p. 964). More specifically, the findings show that when parents use more compromise and negotiation methods to resolve significant conflicts children's fear, distress and other symptoms are diminished. These kinds of skills are taught in some of the divorce education programs.

The research findings presented thus far have provided evidence as to the harmfulness of parental conflict on the post-divorce adjustment of children as well as the need for effective interventions to encourage cooperation between ex-spouses. In addition, the findings have illustrated parental conflict to include not only open conflict between parents, but also resistance and interference with visitation and triangulating behaviors (i.e., putting children in the middle of conflict).

#### Divorce Education Program Evaluations

Much of the literature presented above includes a combination of research variables, e.g., parental conflict, levels of parental involvement, children's adjustment problems, as well as the effectiveness of newer interventions such as divorce education. Thus far little

has been said regarding studies examining solely the effectiveness of divorce education programs. As Gentry (1997) points out, the results of extensive, well-designed evaluations of divorce education programs are difficult to find. Evaluations of divorce education programs in general are difficult to find let alone being able to meet the dual criteria of being extensive, and well designed. Those presented below may not always meet the recommended requirements; however, they do provide us with some evidence into the effectiveness of several divorce education programs.

Zibbell (1992) utilized a small-group approach for determining the effectiveness of small-group methods in inducing divorcing parents to alter their attitudes and behaviors towards one another. The investigator used survey data and open-ended questionnaires to gather his data on three separate small groups.

The short-term results suggest that parents were able to significantly improve their attitudes about cooperation and made some progress in altering their adversarial behaviors. The long-term results show little to no re-litigation among the couples participating, which is another important indicator of program effectiveness.

Although this is good news, it indicates that parents who engage in divorce education programs may be able to engage in effective coparenting practices and thereby substantially reduce the probability that their children will suffer harm. Unfortunately, the small sample size ( $n = 10$ ) limits the generalizability of these findings.

In another study, Bussey (1998) utilized a qualitative approach to determine the long-term impact of a court-mandated education seminar. The sample was small, only six parents completed the questionnaires and three were interviewed in-depth.

Due to the small sample size the findings cannot be taken as a definitive answers as to the effectiveness of the program; however the results were generally positive. The most important results indicate that the program does have the desired impact, which is to give divorcing parents information about how the divorce process effects children and what they can do to make the process less painful for their children.

Shifflett and Cummings (1999) explored the impact of client satisfaction associated with participation in a parent education program that specifically focused on divorce and parental conflict. The investigators utilized quantitative methods and an experimental design to compare



participant outcomes against parent participation in another educational program. The sample was comprised of 29 individuals in the treatment group and nine subjects for the control group.

The significant findings of this study revealed that the program was effective. It educated parents about the negative effects of interparental conflict on children and resulted in positive changes in parent's conflictual behaviors.

Although the results of the study alone are promising, the findings are not generalizable given the small sample size. Additional evaluations will be needed in order to establish or confirm the program's effectiveness.

Frieman, Garon, and Mandell (1994) presented a brief evaluation of a parenting seminar for divorcing parents utilizing a quantitative approach, self-report questionnaires, and non-random, convenience sampling.

The research findings are based on a sample of 66 responses ( $N = 66$ ). The major findings suggest that parents learn how children cope with divorce and how they can take proactive measures to help their children.

Although the findings provide evidence that divorce education is beneficial, it is unclear whether similar

results would be generated given more rigorous methods, like those requiring random sampling and a comparison group.

Arbuthnot, Poole, and Gordon (1996) investigated the use of divorce educational materials in modifying stressful behaviors in post-divorce parents. Their study is unique in that they evaluated the effectiveness of print-based materials to parents who recently filed for divorce, rather than an educational program. Their sample was randomly selected and their sample consisted of 206 mothers and 152 fathers ( $n = 358$ ). The data collection process involved telephone interviews focused on assessing the amounts of loyalty conflicts, parent/child contact and interparental conflict.

The study found that there were no significant, short-term treatment effects. However, at the one-year follow up interview, it was found that self-reported harmful behaviors did declined. Additionally, the more positive parenting behaviors were related to a greater percent of the material read.

It appears that even educational material randomly distributed to divorcing parents may be an effective way to reduce the harmful behaviors of divorcing parents, thereby enhancing children's post-divorce adjustment. This

type of intervention may have shown greater benefits, particularly short-term, if the study examined parents who had requested and then read the materials.

McKenry, Clark, and Stone (1999) conducted a cross-sectional, quantitative study to assess the impact of a court mandated divorce education program over a five-year period. The sampling scheme was a stratified random design and the sample included 33 subjects.

The major findings of the project reveal mixed results. The program was found to be effective in the child domain, but not so in the parental domains. For example, the program was found to be effective in helping parents enhancing children's adjustment to the divorce, which is a major emphasis of the program; however, it failed to garner statistically significant changes in affecting parental attitudes and behaviors towards one another.

Part of the explanation for such mixed results may be due to sample biases or the sample not being representative of the general population. Program participants responding to the survey, reported higher SES levels than those of the control group. They were also more likely to have uncontested divorces and to hold joint

custody arrangements as compared to the general population in their respective county.

Indeed they may have represented less conflictual divorce relationships as Horowitz and Dodson have found: "joint custody families often have more money and resource than divorcing couples with the more common, sole custody arrangements" (as cited in Koel, Clark, Straus, Whitney, & Hauser, 1994, p. 270). It is difficult to say if the findings would have been the same given a more representative sample. Fortunately, the next study provides us with an additional evaluation of the same divorce education program.

Stone, Clark, and McKenry (2000) utilized a qualitative approach to explore, in depth, participants' impression of a divorce education program. Purposive sampling techniques were utilized in this study. Twenty divorced parents that completed the program were subjects in the research project. Data collection involved telephone interviews that focused on the participants' perceptions of their divorce experience, post-divorce adjustment, coparenting experience, and an evaluation of the program.

The major findings suggest that overall the majority of participants found the program to be helpful and

worthwhile, even four to six years later. The program heightened their awareness of the impact of divorce on children and, more importantly, sixteen of the twenty parents reported significant behavioral changes. Specifically, the parents reported decreasing or totally stopping open hostilities towards the other parent and their triangulating behaviors.

Kramer and Washo (1993) evaluated the effectiveness of another brief court-mandated education program, to determine whether and in what ways it may have value for divorcing families. This was the first systematic and independent evaluation of the program. Self-administered questionnaires were used to assess outcomes. Non-random convenience sampling was utilized and the sample was comprised of 198 treatment parents and 43 parents in the control group.

Significant results were found only after the groups were divided into high-, moderate- and low-conflict groups. In particular, the study revealed that parents who reported high inter-parental conflict, triangulation of children, and low levels of adaptive parenting benefited most from the program. It may be that divorce education programs hold the greatest benefit for parents experiencing high levels of distress.

Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, and Trotter (1992) utilized a combined qualitative/quantitative approach in evaluating a community-based program for families experiencing martial separation and divorce. The final sample included 68 program participants and 31 non-participants. Non-random, convenience sampling was utilized. However the sample may have been biased, since along with a 12 page preprogram assessment each parent received a letter from the family law judge strongly encouraging attendance. Participants may have felt coerced to varying degrees, which may have influenced their responses.

Again it was found that the majority of the respondents were satisfied with the program and found it helpful; however, the group comparisons yielded no evidence of better outcomes for participants than non-participants. In other words, they found no significant differences in pre-separation hostility, current child-rearing conflict, current competition, or current cooperation between the treatment and the control group.

The program appears to be ineffective; however, the researchers methodology or data collection procedure may have affected the responses as well as the rates and

therefore the research results, particularly since the response rate at the posttest was only half of the pretest rate. The small sample size and unequal n's may have contributed the failure to detect statistically significant differences between the groups.

For the majority of divorce education program evaluations presented above, supporting evidence as to their effectiveness was found, particularly for the families reporting high levels of parental conflict and harmful behaviors, which is the target population Family Law Courts and divorce researchers are most concerned about. The factors that contribute to effective divorce education programs are presented below.

#### Divorce Education Program Components

Geasler and Blaisure (1998) provide a review of court-connected divorce education program materials being utilized in over half of the counties in the U.S. The purpose of their study was to determine whether the various program components fit with the widely stated goals of divorce education.

Their methods involved gathering program materials from all the counties in the United States with court-connected divorce education program. Data was

collected from 37 sets of program material and were used in the analysis.

One of Geasler and Blaisure's (1998) most important findings include identifying the components that lead to the more positive outcomes of divorce education programs such as employing an active participation strategy, such as role-plays, skills practice, and self-awareness activities. Those divorce education programs utilizing this approach have been shown to be effective in reducing triangulating behaviors and parental conflict.

The Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program, under investigation here, utilizes an active participation strategy, which may imply positive outcomes. In addition to a sound teaching strategy, the program utilizes additional techniques that have proven effective and/or helpful.

For example, videotapes have been found to be helpful in demonstrating the impact of divorce on children. Solutions for Families uses videos primarily in their Part A of the program, which provides parents with information on the developmental stages of children, the typical reactions of children to divorce and how parents can respond to their children's distress. In addition, program handbooks have also been identified as an important



component of the program. Stone, Clark and McKenry (2000) found that many parents found handbooks to be a useful resource. Again Solutions for Families provides each participant with a workbook, a handbook and a list of additional resources.

The Solutions for Families program is different than many of the other divorce education programs in that it is conducted in two phases or parts. As mentioned above, Part A incorporates the use of videos to teach the parents about the effects of divorce on children. The parents complete this three and a half-hour course as a prerequisite to Part B, the second component. Part B, the coparenting component of the program, is a 10-hour program and co-parents participate in and complete the program together. Most other programs include all this information in a two and a half-hour session.

The primary objective of the Solutions for Families program is to reduce levels of parental conflict and to increase cooperation among ex-spouses. Determining degree of program effectiveness will be particularly important given the populations that Solution for Families serves, which reside primarily in the Inland Empire and surrounding areas. More precisely, their clients are frequently court-mandated to attend often because of high

levels of interparental conflict including high rates of re-litigation. The population served by the agency is somewhat unique from many other program evaluations presented thus far, since court-connected divorce education is not mandatory for the general populations in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. However mandatory participation was required in many of the other studies presented above.

### Guiding Theory

The guiding theory for this research project is family systems theory. According to family systems theory, family roles are defined by spoken and unspoken rules that regulate the interactions that occur among family members (Minuchin, 1974). Well-established rules allow families to understand who is a member of the family as well as what roles and task each is responsible for. These clear rules and roles allow families to function satisfactorily. However, these rules and roles become unclear during critical developmental transitions, like separation and divorce.

When such a disruption occurs, a redefining of the rules that regulate the family's interactions and relationships must take place as family membership and

role expectations are altered (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). This is particularly important when considering the significant changes in parenting roles after divorce. Hyden (2001) found that most of the conflicts originate from ex-partners or co-parents' efforts to create or reconstruct their parental roles.

Interventions designed to facilitate the successful redefining of parental roles and that also promote cooperation and reduce conflict, such as those found in divorce education programs, are likely to diminish the ill effects of divorce on children.

#### Summary

Divorce does have a major impact on children and their parents. As illustrated above a child's post divorce adjustment is directly related to how well his or her parents deal with the divorce. Identifying divorce education programs that can effectively influence parental behavior by teaching them how to establish non-hostile relationships with each other is essential, since it is a vital key to child well being. Much of the research suggests promising results; yet, with so much riding on program outcomes evaluations of the program continue to yield mixed results. Moreover small sample sizes continue

to limit our ability to generalize positive findings to overall divorce education effectiveness.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

In this section of the paper, an overview of the research methods utilized in the Solutions for Families program evaluation is presented. Specifically, the study's design, the sampling methods, the data collection process, the procedures, the protection of human subject and the data analysis are presented and discussed in detail.

#### Study Design

The current study represents the first systematic and independent evaluation of the divorce education program developed and implemented by Solutions for Families. A pre-experimental, single group, pretest and posttest research design was utilized to evaluate the program's effectiveness. Pretest/post test results of the treatment group only were used to assess whether perceived improvements in parental behaviors were associated with program participation. The specific research questions were: Is participation associated with reductions in interparental conflict and improvements in supportive, cooperative parenting relationships? Is participation associated with decreases in parental behaviors that are

harmful to children? Does the program provide parent education in a format that results in high levels of participant satisfaction? The first two dimensions were assessed using questionnaires administered before the first session and immediately following the last session. The final area, participant satisfaction, was assessed using a survey following the final session, only.

One of the limitations of this study, as with all survey research, is the limited insight survey data provides us into complex topics, such as redefining parental roles after a divorce. In other words, it may be found that participation was associated with reductions in parental conflict and increases in cooperation between ex-spouses, but what program components were most effective for each person and what else might have been involved in the process remains unknown? These questions are difficult to answer with survey research.

One way this study attempted to combat the limitation of survey research was to utilize several measurements or scales that provide greater insight into the dynamics of interparental conflict and cooperative coparenting practices.

Another limitation of this study arises from the pitfalls of self-reported measures. People do not always

report truthfully their behaviors, opinions, etc. We must understand how a biased manner of self-reporting affects research findings that rely on no other collaborative sources to support the findings. Research results may be distorted unless additional objective sources of data collection are included to support the finding. Moreover, it is impossible to determine to what extent the results may be biased.

The final limitation of the study has to do with the research design. The pre-experimental, single-group design is one of the weakest designs; therefore, the findings are not likely to be generalizable far beyond this project. However this is the only design feasible at the time, since clients on the waiting list, from which a control group would be drawn, received some treatment (Part A of the program) shortly after they enrolled in the program. Utilizing a control group that received some treatment would not likely yield reliable or valid results.

Even with the limitations of the study design and data collection methods, the project represents an important first step in the program evaluation process. It was important to determine first if the program was useful and if participants finished the program with a level of achievement that matches the program's goals. Once this

was established then further investigation may be called for utilizing more rigorous and complex research designs.

The levels of measure for the dependent variables were ordinal and interval. The independent variable was operationalized simply as to whether the participants completed a divorce education program. The dependent variables were measured by Likert scales and include parental conflict, cooperative coparenting relationships and parenting practices. In addition, the dependent variables were operationalized by looking at the following variables: levels co-parental conflict, quality of co-parental interactions, and parental practices or behaviors, particularly triangulating behaviors.

### Sampling

All parents who participated in the Solutions for Families program during the end of January through mid April 2003 were invited to participate in the evaluation research. Since this research project involved a program evaluation, non-random, convenience sampling was utilized.

Participation in the research component was voluntary, even though the vast majority of the parents were court mandated to attend a divorce education program. The single group (the treatment group) was comprised of



those parents in the program during the evaluation period that completed both the pretest and posttest.

As noted above, divorce education programs are for parents that are either divorcing, separating, or in some way unable to create a cooperative coparenting relationship. Therefore, the only sample criteria was that the parents completed both Parts (both A and B) of the Solutions for Families program to be included in the study. The sample included 33 subjects that had completed a both pretest and posttest questionnaires.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The data for this study was collected by means of self-administered questionnaires (Appendix A). The pretest took approximately 10 minutes for participants to complete. The posttest took several minutes longer, since an additional section was added that involved evaluating their overall satisfaction with the Solutions for Families program. All questionnaires were administered at the program site by either the investigator or by one of the program administrators. The data collected included demographic information on each subject as well as the information needed to evaluate the program. The demographic data collected from the surveys included the

following: age, ethnicity, level of education, number of children from this relationship, ages of the children, age subject married, current marital status, length of marriage or relationship, length of separation or divorce of all the subjects.

In order to collect the data for the program evaluation, an instrument combining various scales was created to capture necessary data to answer the specific research questions. As noted above, the posttest for program participants included Kramer and Washo's (1993) Program Satisfaction survey (Cronbach's Alpha .85). The first portion of the survey included a six-item scale that asked parents to rate whether they "strongly disagree", "disagree," "agree" or "strongly agree" that the program was organized, the right length of time, relevant, etc.

The second part of the scale also included six questions that asked parents to rate the helpfulness of the various components of the Solutions for Families program on a 5 point Likert scale, from "not much," "somewhat," "so/so," "much" to "very much." These portions of the questionnaire were used to determine the overall level of customer satisfaction with the program.

The dependent variables were measured using the various scales. For example, parental conflict and

cooperative coparenting relationships were measured using Ahron's (1981) Quality of Coparent Relationship with Former Spouse Scale. This instrument is composed of two sub-scales, the Conflict and the Support sub-scales. The Conflict scale contains four items in which parents were asked to rate on a five point Likert like scale how often conflict occurred when they communicated with their ex-spouse. The range of responses ran from "always," "often," "occasionally," "rarely," to "never." The coefficient alpha for this measurement is .88 for women and .89 for men.

The Support sub-scale was a six-item scale that asked parents to rate the frequency their former spouse cooperated and/or was a resource for them. The coefficient alpha is .75 for men and .74 for women. On both dimensions the parents rated their answers using a Likert like scale. The range of responses was identical to those presented above. The higher the totals score the more conflictual, less supportive the coparenting relationship.

Additional scales were included to measure additional dimensions of conflict such as Kramer and Washo's (1993) Post-marital Conflict Index (test-retest reliability is .70,  $p < .001$ ), which asked parents their perceptions about the extent to which conflict occurred in their

interactions with their former spouse. This was a single item, five point scale with response categories ranging from "not at all," "rarely," "occasionally," "often," to "a great deal."

The final conflict index of the questionnaire included a scale that measured the frequency in which parents engaged in triangulating behaviors, which are particularly harmful to children. Specifically, the Child Rearing Behaviors (Kramer & Washo, 1993) scale was used to rate how often parents participated in six parenting practices. Again a five point Likert like index was used with response categories ranging from "never," "rarely," "occasionally," "often" to "very often."

Lastly, a coparenting support and cooperation measurement was included in the questionnaire. The Quality of Coparenting Relationship (Kramer & Washo, 1993) asks parents to rate how well their current coparenting relationship works with their ex-spouse on a three-item, five point Likert like scale. The response categories for this scale include "very poorly," "poorly," "so/so," "well," to "very well." The alphas for the scales are .76 and .85, pretest and posttest respectively.

Each of the scales in the questionnaire, with the exception of Ahron's (which will be examined as a single

measure of conflict and cooperation), will be utilized to determine different dimensions of conflict and cooperative coparenting practices. All of which will be used to answer the specific questions raised by this study.

### Procedures

Overall the data collection procedures involved administering two questionnaires to the parents. The first survey was given prior to parents' participation in Part A--the children of divorce component of the program. The second survey was given immediately following the completion of Part B, the coparenting component (at the end of the third session). The pretest and posttest were identical except the posttest included an additional survey that asked participants to give their reactions to the Solutions for Families program.

Before the actual questionnaires were distributed to the research participants, a staff member from Solutions for Families introduced the investigator and the research project. The investigator presented an overview of the study and what participation in the study required in terms of time commitment required to complete a pretest and posttest as well as informed the parents that participation in the study was completely voluntary.

Information was given as to the confidential nature of their answers and that only group data would be used in the study. Subjects were then given a packet containing an oral consent form (Appendix B), a questionnaire, and a debriefing statement (Appendix C). Respondents were instructed to complete their questionnaires as truthfully as possible. Subjects were also told they may skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering, or if the questions became too difficult they could stop at anytime.

Preplanning for the data collection phase of this research project was ongoing. The research instrument needed to be reviewed and approved by the Solutions for Families program developer and director, Dr. Harold. This step was completed on January 22, 2003. The actual date that the data collection began was January 25, 2003.

The data was collected for over a twelve-week period. In an effort to obtain the largest sample possible, data was collected whenever new classes begin and ended.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

The confidentiality of the study participants is a primary concern of this researcher and the Solutions for Families staff. Therefore, in order to protect the human subjects involved in this study, the following precautions

were taken. First, the researcher limited the amount of personal identifying information collected that would link questionnaires to the individual respondents. In other words, names, addresses, names of children, and such was not collected in order to protect the anonymity of the study participants. In addition, oral consent forms were utilized rather than signed informed consent forms to further protect the participants' identity. Study participants were identified by a case ID numbers only.

Second, the data was kept confidential by limiting the number of individuals who could review the data. The only ones who had access to the data were my faculty advisor and myself. The data was kept locked at the researcher's home during the study. Once the questionnaires had been collected and the data had been entered into a computer file and analyzed, the questionnaires were then destroyed.

Participants were also informed in the introduction to the research project and in the oral consent forms that they could refuse to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also informed about the confidential nature of their answers. Debriefing statements included a list of local mental health

providers for participants who felt distressed as a result of participating in this study.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted utilizing a quantitative approach to compare outcomes of the sample's pretest/posttest mean scores. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics in order to summarize and describe the characteristics of the sample.

The research findings dealing with the level of participant satisfaction is also presented using descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics include univariate statistics such as frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, and dispersion.

In order to determine program effectiveness in reducing parental conflict and increasing cooperative parenting, bivariate statistics were used to explore the potential relationship between program participation (the independent variable) and the dependent variables. The inferential statistics include the use of t-tests and simple analysis of the variance to determine if there are significant differences in the level of parental conflict, positive coparenting relationships and improvements in



parental practices as a result of participation in the divorce education program.

#### Summary

As noted above, the purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program in reducing interparental conflict, promoting cooperative parenting and alleviating harmful parenting practices. The findings of this study will provide some supporting evidence as to the effectiveness of this program and programs of this kind, particularly for parents in high conflict post-divorce relationships. In addition, the study hoped to show a high level of customer satisfaction with the program.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

Included in this chapter are the results of the study. Data analysis was conducted utilizing a quantitative approach to compare outcomes of the respondents' pretest and posttest responses. First, a description of the sample is presented, which includes the demographic data of the respondents, as well as the answers to the survey questions of the various scales at pretest time and again at the posttest. Next the results of the statistical analyses that address the research questions under examination in this study are presented.

#### Presentation of the Findings

Descriptive statistics were employed in the data analysis to summarize and describe the sample as well as the respondents' answers to both the pretest and posttest questionnaires. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the respondents. A total of 33 parents completed both the pretest and posttest and comprise the study sample. Approximately 60.6% (20) of the respondents are male and the remaining 39.4% (13) are female. The age

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender (N = 33)		
Male	20	60.6
Female	13	39.4
Age in years(N = 33)		
25-30	7	21.1
31-36	12	36.4
37-42	8	24.3
43-47	6	18.2
Ethnicity (N = 33)		
White	21	63.6
African American	8	24.2
Hispanic	3	9.1
Other	1	3.0
Education (N = 33)		
High School Graduate	2	6.1
Some College or Trade School	21	63.6
College Graduate	6	18.2
Graduate or Professional Degree	4	12.1
Age First Married (N = 33)		
17-20	5	15.1
21-24	8	24.2
25-28	11	33.4
29-32	3	9.1
33-40	6	18.2
Years Divorced (N = 33)		
0-1 year	5	15.2
>1-3 years	8	24.3
>3-5 years	8	24.3
>5-8 years	12	36.4
Number of Children (N = 33)		
1 child	17	51.5
2 children	9	27.3
3 children	7	21.2
Age of Children (N = 56)		
2-4 years	8	14.5
5-7 years	16	28.9
8-10 years	23	41.5
11-13 year	6	10.9
14-16 years	2	3.6

range of the sample is 25 to 47 years and the mean age of the respondents is 35.9 years. Slightly more than half of the respondents (57.4%) are between the ages of 25 and 36 years, 24.3% are between the ages of 37 and 41 years, and the remaining 18.2% are between 42 and 47 years of age.

The majority of the respondents (63.6%) are White. The next largest group in the sample is African American, which made up approximately 24% of the sample's population. Slightly more than nine percent of the respondents are Hispanic and the remaining 3.0% of the sample reported their ethnicity as Other.

The respondents' education levels ranged from high school graduate to graduate or professional degree. Over 70% of the respondents indicated that they had attended some college or trade school. Only two respondents (6.1%) held only a high school diploma. Six respondents (18.2%) had graduated from college and the remaining 12% held a graduate or professional degree. Overall, the respondents are well educated.

The age of the respondents when they first married or began their coparenting relationship range in age from 17 to 40 years. The mean age of marriage for the sample is approximately 26 years of age. Five respondents (15.1%) married at ages either at or between 17 and 20 years,

another 24.2% married between 21 and 24 years of age, eleven (33.4%) of the respondents married between 25 and 28 years, three (9.1%) married between 29 and 32 years and the remaining six (18.2%) married between 33 and 40 years of age.

The number of years the respondents have either been divorced or separated from their co-parents range from less than a year to a maximum of eight years. The mean length of years since the divorce for the sample is about 4 years. Five (15.2%) of the respondents have been divorced for one year or less, another 24.3% have been divorced for more than one year and up to three years, another 24.3% have been divorced more than three years and up to five years. The largest group of respondents (36.4%) has been divorced from more than five years and up to 8 years.

The current marital status of most of the group (39.4%) is married. The next largest group of respondents (30.3%) indicated that they are either divorced or single. Approximately 21% of the sample are living with someone and only one respondent (4.3%) has never been married.

The numbers of children the respondents have range from one child to three. The mean number of children of the respondents for the sample is 1.7. Over half of the

respondents (51.5%) have only one child, another nine (27.3%) have two children and the remaining seven (21.2%) respondents have three children.

The age of the respondents' children range from two to sixteen years of age. The mean age of the sample's children is 8.39 years. Eight of the respondents' children ages are between 2 and 4 years, seventeen are between 5 and 7 years of age. Twenty-three children are between 8 and 10 years of age, an additional six children are between 11 and 13 years old and the remaining two are between 14 and 16 years of age.

#### Pretest/Posttest Frequencies

The Parenting Practices Scale measured six parenting behaviors. Respondents were asked to rate how often they engaged in triangulating behaviors that are harmful to children. As illustrated in Table 2, the frequency in which respondents had previously engaged in these harmful behaviors declined after completing the divorced education program. For example, the results show that respondents' reported behavior of criticizing their former spouse in front of their children either "occasionally to often" declined by 6%. The number of respondents that reported

Table 2. Parenting Practices of Respondents

Triangulating Behavior	Frequency T1 (n)	Percent T1 (%)	Frequency T2 (n)	Percent T2 (%)
Criticize former spouse in front of child				
Never	11	33.3%	17	51.5
Rarely	15	45.5	11	33.3
Occasionally	6	18.2	5	15.2
Often	1	3.0	0	0
Probe child about other parent's private life				
Never	17	51.5	22	66.7
Rarely	13	39.4	9	27.3
Occasionally	3	9.1	2	6.1
Tell child other parent is to blame for divorce				
Never	24	72.7	28	84.8
Rarely	7	21.2	3	9.1
Occasionally	1	3.0	2	6.1
Often	1	3.0	0	0
Fight with former spouse in front of child				
Never	11	33.3	14	42.4
Rarely	10	30.3	12	36.4
Occasionally	9	27.3	6	18.2
Often	2	6.1	1	3.0
Very Often	1	3.0	0	0
Try to get the child to see you as favorite parent				
Never	23	69.7	27	81.8
Rarely	8	24.2	5	15.2
Occasionally	2	6.1	1	3.0
Try to limit the child's contact with other parent				
Never	26	78.8	27	81.8
Rarely	7	21.2	6	18.2

"never" having engaged in this kind of behavior also increased by 18.2%. Four fewer parents (12.5%) reported that they "rarely" practice in this kind of behavior. The number of parents that had previously probed their child about the other parent's private life also declined at follow-up. Twenty-two program participants (66.7%)

indicate that they no longer engage in that kind of questioning behavior, this is a 15.2% improvement. There was also an increase (12.0%) in the number of parents that "never" tell their children that the other parent is to blame for the divorce. And four parents no longer behave in this manner "often," "occasionally" or even "rarely."

In the pretest, the vast majority (63.6%) of respondents reported that they "never" to "rarely" fought with their former spouse in front of the children. A 15.2% improvement in this dimension was also found at the posttest. The remaining 18.2% reported that they "occasionally" fight in front of the children. Only one respondent reported at the posttest that they "often" fought and none indicated that they "very often" fought in front of their children, whereas at the pretest, three parents had reported fighting "often" to "very often" in front of their children.

There were also improvements in the area of parents' attempts to get their children to see them as their favorite parent. The percent of parents that reported "never" engaging in this kind of behavior increased from 69.7% to 81.8% at the posttest, which is approximately a 12% increase in number of respondents stopping this harmful behavior. Finally, slight gains (3.0%) were also



found in the number of respondents that indicated "never" attempting to limit the children's contact with the other parent. Overall the respondents, as a group, indicated that they "rarely" to "never" engaged in this kind of behavior at the pretest and again at the posttest.

The quality of the coparenting relationship also improved as a result of participation in the program. Table 3 provides an overview of the three dimensions of the Coparenting Relationship scale and the respondents' answers given at the pretest and at the posttest. In this scale respondents were asked to rate how well their coparenting relationship works.

The number of respondents that reported sharing child rearing responsibilities with their former spouse "very well" or "well" increased from three (9.1%) to nine (27.2%) by the end of the program. There was no increase in the percentage of respondents that reported sharing their child rearing responsibilities "so/so." It remained at less than three percent of the sample at the posttest. More importantly, the number of respondents reporting that these responsibilities were shared either "poorly" or "very poorly" declined from approximately sixty-four

Table 3. Quality of Respondents Coparenting Relationships

Triangulating Behavior	Frequency T1 (n)	Percent T1 (%)	Frequency T2 (n)	Percent T2 (%)
How well do you and former spouse share child rearing responsibilities?				
Very poorly	8	24.2	7	21.2
Poorly	13	39.4	8	24.2
So/so	9	27.3	9	27.3
Well	2	6.1	8	24.2
Very well	1	3.0	1	3.0
How well do you communicate with former spouse about the child?				
Very poorly	11	33.3	9	27.3
Poorly	19	57.6	8	24.2
So/so	3	9.1	9	27.3
Well	0	0.0	6	18.2
Very well	0	0.0	1	3.0
How well do you and former spouse agree when making decisions about your child?				
Very poorly	13	39.4	6	18.2
Poorly	11	33.3	10	30.3
So/so	9	27.3	10	30.3
Well	0	0	7	21.2

percent to approximately forty-five percent of the respondents by the posttest.

Next, parents were asked to report on their ability to communicate about their children with their former spouse. Gains were found in the number of respondents that reported being able to communicate from "very well" to "well" with their ex-spouses, from none at the pretest to seven (21.72%) at the posttest. The results also show an 18.2% increase in the number of respondents that now communicate "so/so" with their ex-spouse. Importantly,

those respondents reporting that they either communicate "poorly" to "very poorly" decreased from approximately ninety-one percent to less than fifty-two percent of the sample. The greatest decrease was found in the "poorly" response category where nineteen respondents initially indicated communicating "poorly" with their ex-spouses had been reduced to eight at the posttest.

In rating how well the respondents agreed with their former spouse when making a decision about the children, the results show that parents who reported agreeing either "so/so" to "well" at the pretest went from 27.3% of the sample to 51.5%. The greatest gains were found in the number of parents that reported at the posttest that they agree "well" with their former spouse about decisions made about their children, from zero percent at the pretest to approximately twenty-one percent by the posttest. The number of respondents that reported agreeing either "poorly" or "very poorly" declined as well. Those indicating that they agreed "very poorly" dropped by a third, from 72.7% to 48.5%. The percentage of respondents that reported agreeing "very poorly" about decisions made with their former spouse about the children declined the most by the end of the program, from 39.4% of the

participants at the pretest to only 18.2% of the sample at the posttest.

In Table 4 the results of the Post Marital Conflict Index are presented. Respondents were asked to rate on a single index, the extent to which conflict occurs in their interactions with their former spouse.

As illustrated in the table, respondents reported that the extent of conflict they experienced with their ex-spouses declined at the posttest. The results show that one (3.0%) respondent reported that conflict occurred "not at all" in interactions with their ex-partner at both the pretest and posttest.

Table 4. Post Marital Conflict Index of Respondents

Extent of Conflict	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
	T1 (n)	T1 (%)	T2 (n)	T2 (%)
To what extent does conflict occur in your interactions with your former spouse?				
Not at all	1	3.0	1	3.0
Rarely	1	3.0	6	18.2
Occasionally	5	15.2	10	30.3
Often	10	30.3	13	39.4
A great deal	16	48.5	3	9.1

In addition, the number of respondents grew from six percent at the pretest to twenty-one percent at the posttest in those stating they "not at all" or "rarely" experience conflict in their interactions. Those

respondents reporting that they "occasionally" experienced conflict in their interactions with their ex-spouse doubled, from five (15.2%) to ten (30.3%) by the posttest. Importantly, the number of respondents indicating that their interactions are fraught with conflict "a great deal" decreased significantly, from sixteen (48.5%) at the pretest to only three (9.1%) by the end of the program. This is a significant finding even though the number of parents reporting that they "often" experience conflict increased from ten (30.3%) at the pretest to thirteen (39.4%) at the posttest. This shows an improvement, at least, somewhat of a reduction in the frequency of interparental conflict, from "a great deal" to "often" or one of the other response categories.

The survey results of the Quality of Parent Relationship with Former Spouse scale for the respondents are presented in Table 5 and Table 6. The overall scale contains two sub-scales that measure both conflict and support or the frequency of cooperation between ex-spouses. The higher the combined score of the two sub-scales the more conflictual the less cooperative the coparenting relationship.

Table 5 presents the results of the Conflict subscale. As seen in the table, a couple of respondents

(6.1%) indicated that arguments with their former spouse occur "not at all" at the posttest, where as at the pretest only one respondent selected this response. Those that "rarely" argued increased from by thirty percent, from 3.0% at the pretest to 33.3% by the posttest, and

Table 5. Quality of Parent Relationship with Former Spouse: Frequency of Conflict of Respondents

Frequency of Conflict Sub-scale	Frequency T1 (n)	Percent T1 (%)	Frequency T2 (n)	Percent T2 (%)
How often does an argument result when you and your former spouse discuss parenting issues?				
Not at all	1	3.0	2	6.1
Rarely	1	3.0	11	33.3
Occasionally	7	21.2	8	24.2
Often	12	36.4	9	27.3
A great deal	12	36.4	3	9.1
How often is the underlying atmosphere one of hostility or anger?				
Not at all	0	0	1	3.0
Rarely	2	6.1	6	18.2
Occasionally	8	24.2	11	33.3
Often	11	33.3	12	36.4
A great deal	12	36.4	3	9.1
How often is the conversation stressful and tense?				
Not at all	0	0	1	3.0
Rarely	1	3.0	4	12.1
Occasionally	7	21.2	9	27.3
Often	17	51.5	15	45.5
A great deal	8	24.2	4	12.1
How often do you and your former spouse have basic differences of opinion about issues related to child rearing?				
Not at all	0	0	2	6.1
Rarely	4	12.1	6	18.2
Occasionally	9	27.3	15	45.5
Often	12	36.4	7	21.2
A great deal	8	24.2	3	9.1

respondents that reported that they "occasionally" argued increased from twenty-one percent to twenty-four percent after participation in the program. Importantly, the number of respondents reporting arguments resulting from discussions about parenting issues that were either "often" or "a great deal" declined by half, from 72.8% (24) to 36.4% (12) at the posttest.

The results also show a decline in the frequency that respondents indicated that the underlying atmosphere of their interactions with their ex-spouse as being one of hostility and anger. At the pretest, the vast majority of respondents (93.9%) reported that at least "occasionally" hostility or anger underscored the atmosphere. However at the posttest, the results show that 21.2% of the respondents indicated that the atmosphere was "not at all" or "rarely" hostile or angry. A decline in the percentage of respondents reporting that the underlying interactions with their ex-spouse were either "often" or "a great deal" hostile or angry was also found; the percentage went from 69.7% to 45.5% by the posttest.

The results also show that respondents indicated a decline in the frequency of tense and stressful conversations with their ex-spouses. Specifically, the number of respondents that reported that they found their

conversations either "not at all," "rarely" or "occasionally" tense and stressful increased from eight (24.2%) to fourteen (42.4%). In addition, a slight decrease was found in the number of respondents that reported experiencing tense and stressful conversations "often" with their ex-spouse, from 51.5% (17) at the pretest to 45.5% (15) at the posttest. In addition, at the pretest, eight (24.2%) respondents reported that their conversations were tense or stressful "a great deal"; however, at the posttest only four (12.1%) reported that their conversations remained unchanged. This is a fifty percent improvement.

It was further found that the number of respondents who reported experiencing basic differences of opinions regarding child rearing with the ex-spouses declined at the posttest. For example, eight (24.2%) respondents initially reported experiencing a difference of opinion with their former spouse a "great deal" of the time, whereas at the posttest only three (9.1%) continued to experience this difficulty. The number of respondents that reported "often" experiencing a difference of opinion at the pretest had by the posttest dropped by about 40%, from twelve (36.4%) to seven (21.2%). Those reporting having "occasionally" experiencing a difference of opinion



increased from nine (27.3%) to fifteen (45.5%) and the number of respondents that either "rarely" or "not at all" doubled, from four (12.1%) at pretest to eight (24.3%) by the completion of the program.

Table 6 presents the results of the Support subscale of the Parent Relationship with Former Spouse scale. This scale asks respondents to rate how frequently they cooperate in various areas of child rearing. The results show that parents report more cooperation at the posttest than at the pretest.

The vast majority (87.8%) of respondents reported at the pretest that they "rarely" to "not at all" sought child related help from their former spouse. At the posttest, however, the results show that the number of parents reporting that they "rarely" or "not at all" sought the assistance of their former spouse decreased by approximately 24%. The number of respondents reporting that they sought child related help "occasionally" increased from 6.1% to 27.3% at the posttest. Only one respondent in the pretest and two in the posttest reported seeking help "often" from their former spouse. The results also reveal that only one respondent in the pretest and none in the posttest sought help "a great deal" of the time from their former spouse.

Table 6. Quality of Parent Relationship with Former Spouse: Frequency of Support of Respondents

Frequency of Support Sub-scale	Frequency T1 (n)	Percent T1 (%)	Frequency T2 (n)	Percent T2 (%)
When you need help regarding the children how often do you seek it from your former spouse?				
Not at all	11	33.3	9	27.3
Rarely	18	54.5	13	39.4
Occasionally	2	6.1	9	27.3
Often	1	3.0	2	6.1
A great deal	1	3.0	0	0
Would you say your former spouse is a resource in raising your children?				
Not at all	17	51.5	8	30.4
Rarely	9	27.3	14	43.5
Occasionally	6	18.2	8	21.7
Often	1	3.0	2	4.3
A great deal	0	0.0	1	3.0
How often do you accommodate changes in visitation arrangements if your former spouse needs to make a change?				
Not at all	1	3.0	0	0
Rarely	6	18.2	2	6.1
Occasionally	9	27.3	17	51.5
Often	6	18.2	10	30.3
A great deal	11	33.3	4	12.1
Does your former spouse go out of the way to accommodate any changes you need to make?				
Not at all	17	51.5	5	15.2
Rarely	10	30.3	15	45.5
Occasionally	4	21.1	9	27.3
Often	0	0	3	9.1
A great deal	2	6.1	1	3.0
Do you feel that your former spouse understands and is supportive of your special needs as a custodial, or non-custodial parent?				
Not at all	23	69.7	12	36.4
Rarely	10	30.3	11	33.3
Occasionally	0		8	24.2
Often	0		2	6.1

The results of the second question reveal that initially the majority of respondents (51.5%) reported

that they "not at all" viewed their former partner as a resource and another 30.3% "rarely" viewed them as such. At the posttest, however, the number reporting either "not at all" or "rarely" saw their ex-spouse as a resource declined by 12.2%, from 78.8% to 66.6%.

The number of respondents that reported that they "occasionally" saw their former spouse as a resource increased from 18.2% to 24.2% at the posttest. In addition, one respondent at the pretest and two at the posttest indicated that they "often" viewed their former spouses as a resource, and only one respondent reported that they held this view "a great deal" by posttest.

When respondents were asked how often they accommodated visitation changes for the benefit of their ex-spouse, 51.5% at the pretest and 42.4% at the posttest report accommodating "a great deal" to "often"; whereas those reporting accommodating "occasionally" almost doubled, from 27.3% to 51.5%, at the end of the program. A smaller percentage of respondents 18.2% at pretest and 26.1% at posttest reported that they "rarely" made accommodations. No one reported in the posttest that accommodations were "not at all" made by them in regards to changes of visitation arrangements requested by their

ex-spouse and only one respondent in the pretest reported being "not at all" accommodating.

Regarding the question about viewing their former spouses as accommodating when they needed to make a change improved as a result of program participation. Eighty-one percent of the respondents initially reported that their former partners were "not at all" to "rarely" accommodating, whereas in the posttest 60.7% rated their former partner as being similarly accommodating.

Additionally, 21.1% of the respondents rated their former spouses as "occasionally" accommodating at the pretest, whereas 27.3% rated them as such at posttest. Three of the respondents indicated at the posttest that their ex-spouse was "often" accommodating and two respondents at the pretest and only one at the posttest rated their ex-spouse accommodating "a great deal."

At the pretest, the majority of respondents (69.7%) reported that their role as either the custodial or non-custodial parent was "not at all" understood and supported by their former spouse, whereas the remaining 30.3% felt that they were "rarely" understood and supported. In the posttest, however, significant improvements were found. For example, the number of respondents reporting that they were "not at all"

understood and supported declined by approximately 48%. The number of respondents that reported "rarely" feeling supported or understood increased slightly from 30.3% of the sample to 33.3%; however, the number of respondents reporting "occasionally" feeling support and understood increased by 24.2% and those reporting "often" feeling the support increased by 6.1%.

Table 7 and Table 8 present the results of the respondents' evaluation of the Solution for Families divorce education program. Respondents were asked to rate the overall program structure and its helpfulness to divorcing parents. Each question asked respondents to rate the extent they agreed with the statements about Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program.

As the results show, almost all of the respondents (93.3%) stated that they either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the program was organized. Less than 7% of the sample "strongly disagreed" with the statement about program organization.

Again, most of the respondents (89.7%) reported that they either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the program material was relevant to divorcing parents. Less than 7%

Table 7. Respondents' Rating of the Program's Structure

Evaluation	Frequency T1 (n)	Percent T1 (%)
Was the program organized?		
Strongly disagree	2	6.7
Agree	13	43.3
Strongly agree	15	50.0
Was the program material relevant to divorcing parents?		
Strongly disagree	1	3.4
Disagree	2	6.9
Agree	14	48.3
Strongly agree	12	41.4
The program should be shorter.		
Strongly disagree	3	10.3
Disagree	19	65.5
Agree	6	20.7
Strongly agree	1	3.4
The program should be longer		
Strongly disagree	7	24.1
Disagree	13	44.8
Agree	4	13.8
Strongly agree	5	17.2
The program included enough time for discussion		
Disagreed	1	3.4
Agree	21	72.4
Strongly agree	7	24.1
The program was worthwhile overall		
Strongly disagree	1	3.4
Disagree	2	6.9
Agree	11	37.9
Strongly agree	15	51.7

of the sample reported that they "disagreed" and another 3.4% "strongly disagreed" that the program material was relevant for divorcing parents.

As far as the program's duration, the majority (75.8%) of the respondents either "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" with the statement that the program should be

shorter. However, the remaining 24.1% of the respondents either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the program should be shorter. When respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agreed that program should be longer, the majority (68.9%) of the sample either "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that the program should be longer. However 31% of the sample was almost evenly split between the two remaining categories, either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that the program should be longer.

When respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement that the program offered enough time for discussion again almost all of the respondents (96.5%) either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement. Only one respondent (3.4%) "disagreed" that the program allowed enough time for discussion.

Finally, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement that the program overall was worthwhile, the vast majority of the respondents (89.6%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement. The remaining 10.3% either "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that the program was worthwhile overall.

Table 8 presents the results of the respondents rating of the helpfulness of Solutions for Families

Divorce Education Program. Most of the respondents (69.0%) reported that they agreed with the statement that the program helped them to be more sensitive to their child's needs and feelings either "much" or "very much."

Approximately 24% of the sample agreed that the program was either "so/so" or "somewhat" helpful. The remaining 6.9% felt the program was "not much" help in this area.

Again the majority of respondents (62.1%) reported that they found the program helpful as to providing them with ideas on how to talk to their child about the divorce either "much" to "very much." About 17% of the sample reported that the program was "so/so" helpful and another 7% reported "somewhat" helpful in this area. The remaining 13.8% rated the program as "not much" help in giving them ideas on talking with their children about the divorce.

The program's helpfulness as rated by respondents in the area of helping them talk to their child about the other parent was found to be by the majority of respondents (62.1%) to be of "much" to "very much" help. In addition, 17.2% of the sample reported that the program offered "so/so" help, whereas, another 17.2% rated it as "somewhat" helpful. The remaining 3.4% of the respondents indicated that the program was "not much" help in this area.



Table 8. Respondents' Rating of the Program's Helpfulness

Evaluation	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Helped me be more sensitive to my child's needs and feelings.		
Not much	2	6.9
Somewhat	1	3.4
So/so	6	20.7
Much	12	41.4
Very much	8	27.6
Gave me ideas on how to talk to my child about the divorce.		
Not much	4	13.8
Somewhat	2	6.9
So/so	5	17.2
Much	8	27.6
Very much	10	34.5
Provided guidance on how to talk to my child about other parent.		
Not much	1	3.4
Somewhat	5	17.2
So/so	5	17.2
Much	8	27.6
Very much	10	34.5
Gave me ideas about what to do and not to do with my child.		
Not much	2	6.9
Somewhat	2	6.9
So/so	7	24.1
Much	8	27.6
Very much	10	34.5
Suggested ways to talk to my former spouse about our child.		
Not much	1	3.4
Somewhat	2	6.9
So/so	2	6.9
Much	13	44.8
Very much	11	37.9
Encourage me to improve my communication with my former spouse		
Not much	1	3.4
Somewhat	2	6.9
So/so	3	10.3
Much	12	41.4
Very much	11	37.9

Again, most of the respondents (86.2%) reported that the program was at least "so/so" helpful in teaching them

what to do and not do with their children. Approximately 7% of the respondents rated the program as helpful "somewhat" in this dimension and the remaining 6.9% rated the program as "not much" help.

When asked to rate if the program was helpful in teaching them ways to talk to their former spouse about their children, most of the respondents (82.7%) rated the program as either "much" to "very much" help and another 13.8% rated the program as offering help in this area at least "somewhat." Only one respondent (3.4%) reported finding the program "not much" helpful in this area.

Finally, the results show that 80% of the respondents rated that the program as helpful in encouraging them to improve their communication with the former spouse either "much" to "very much." Another 10% of the respondents rated the program helpfulness as "so/so" and 7% rated it as "somewhat" helpful. The remaining 3% rated the program as providing "not much" help in this area or encouragement from the program.

#### t-Tests

Table 9 presents the findings of all the four primary scales utilized in this study, according to gender. Preliminary analysis revealed only one significant difference between the key variables under study and the

gender of respondents. Independent t tests were preformed to determine if there were any significant differences in reported parenting practices/triangulating behaviors, the quality of coparental relationships and levels of cooperation, and interparental conflict, and the respondents' gender. No significant gender differences were found, except in the reported parenting practices or harmful behaviors prior to participation in the program. Specifically, women initially reported engaging in triangulating behaviors significantly more frequently than the men in the sample, ( $t = -2.296$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The results of the paired t-tests to determine the effectiveness of the program according to the research questions under consideration are presented below. In each test, significant differences were found.

The first question presented in the research design asked if participation in the Solutions for Families' Divorce Education Program was associated with reductions in interparental conflict and improvements in supportive, cooperative coparenting relationships. Three scales were utilized to address this question.

Table 9. Quality of Coparental Relationships, Conflict Measures, and Parenting Practices of Respondents by Gender

Scale	Pretest		Posttest	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Triangulating parenting behaviors				
Men	8.85	(1.79)	8.30	(1.72)
Women	10.69	(2.84)	8.69	(2.46)
Coparental Relationship Quality				
Men	6.10	(1.77)	7.35	(3.18)
Women	5.54	(1.861)	8.08	(2.29)
Level of Conflict				
Men	4.15	(1.14)	3.55	(0.94)
Women	4.23	(0.83)	3.00	(1.00)
Conflict & Cooperation				
Men	35.45	(3.94)	31.7	(4.34)
Women	35.31	(4.25)	29.15	(6.04)

One of the scales utilized in this project measured the quality of the coparenting relationship at Pretest and again at Posttest. The results of the data analysis are presented in Table 10.

As illustrated in the table, significant results were reported by respondents in two areas under consideration:

1) communicating with their former spouse about their children and 2) agreeing with their former spouse when making decisions about their children. Overall, the results of the t-tests show that respondents achieved significant changes in the quality of their coparenting relationship as a result of participation in the divorce education program ( $t = -3.99$ ,  $df = 32$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 10. Quality of Respondents' Coparenting Relationship

Interactions	Pretest		Posttest		t
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
Share parenting responsibility	2.24	(1.00)	2.64	(1.17)	-2.0
Communicate about the children	1.76	(0.61)	2.45	(1.18)	-4.2*
Agree about child related decisions	1.88	(0.82)	2.55	(1.03)	-3.5*

\*  $p < .01$ 

The paired sample t-test results show that respondents also reported statistically significant reductions in the amount of conflict they experience in their interactions with their former spouse at posttest, ( $t = 4.24$ ,  $df = 32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The results are presented in Table 11. On this index, the higher the score, the greater the occurrence of conflict in the interactions between former spouses.

Table 11. Post Marital Conflict Scores of Respondents

Extent of conflict	Pretest		Posttest		T
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
Level of conflict	4.18	(1.01)	3.33	(0.99)	4.24*

\* $p < .01$ 

Lastly, the results of the scale measuring both the level of cooperation and conflict that respondents reported experiencing with their former spouse is

presented in Table 12. The higher the overall score on this measure, the more conflictual and the less cooperative the coparenting relationship is likely to be. Statistically significant differences were found when paired t-tests were conducted.

Table 12. Quality of Respondents Relationship with Former Spouse Subscale

Interactions	Pretest		Posttest		T
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
Frequency of argument	4.0	(1.00)	3.0	(1.12)	4.89**
Hostile/tense atmosphere	4.0	(0.94)	3.30	(0.98)	4.07**
Stressful/tense conversation	3.97	(0.77)	3.52	(0.97)	2.89**
Have difference of opinions	3.73	(0.98)	3.09	(1.01)	2.88**
Seek help from former spouse	1.88	(0.89)	2.12	(0.89)	-1.39
Sees ex-spouse as resource	1.73	(0.88)	2.21	(0.99)	-2.78**
Sees self as accommodating	3.61	(1.22)	3.48	(0.80)	0.64
Sees ex-spouse as accommodating	1.79	(1.08)	2.39	(0.97)	-2.59*
Feels understood and supported	1.30	(0.47)	2.00	(0.94)	-4.36**

\*p<.05 and \*\*p<.01

As the results show, reductions were reported in the frequency of arguments between respondents and their former spouses when discussion parenting issues, the

frequency that the underlying atmosphere was one of hostility and anger, the frequency that the conversation was stressful and tense and there was a substantial reduction in the frequency that former partners experienced basic differences of opinions.

In addition, respondents reported noteworthy changes in the amount of support and understanding they received from their former spouse. There were also significant improvements in respondents' attitudes towards their former partner as a result of program participation. For example, respondents indicated that they saw their former spouse as a resource more frequently than they had prior to participation in the program and they also rated them as more accommodating to changes they may have to make in regards to child-center matters.

Overall, the results of this index show a significant reduction in the mean scores of respondents after participation in the program, ( $t = 2.41$ ,  $df = 22$ ,  $p = < .05$ ). These findings suggest reductions in respondents' levels of interparental conflict and improvements in cooperation between former spouses.

In sum, the results of the three measures of conflict and cooperation indicate that participation in the program is associated with improvements in coparenting

relationships and significant reductions in the amount of interparental conflict.

The second research question of this study asked whether participation was associated with changes in parents' behaviors, particularly triangulating behaviors that are harmful to children. Table 13 presents the findings of paired sample t-tests of participants' responses at the pretest and the posttest.

In this scale respondents were asked to rate how frequently they engaged in a set of parenting practices that were likely to draw the child into post-marital conflict. The higher the total scores the more frequently the parent engaged in these harmful behaviors.

Table 13. Respondents' Parenting Practices

Interactions	Pretest		Posttest		t
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
Criticized former spouse in front of child	1.91	(0.80)	1.64	(0.74)	1.87
Probed child about other parent's life	1.58	(0.66)	1.39	(0.61)	1.29
Blamed other parent for divorce	1.36	(0.70)	1.21	(0.55)	1.31
Fight in front of child	2.15	(1.06)	1.82	(0.85)	2.07*
Get child to see them as favorite	1.36	(0.60)	1.21	(0.48)	1.35
Limit child's contact with other parent	1.21	(0.42)	1.18	(0.39)	0.44

\*p<.05



As indicated in the results a significant change was found in only one parenting behaviors, that of fighting with the other parent in front of the child. However, when an independent t-test was conducted on the total score for the scale, a significant improvement or an actual decline in these kinds of triangulating behaviors was found, ( $t = 3.04$ ,  $df\ 32$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### Overall Program Evaluation

Finally, the last research question asked whether the program was presented in a format that met high standards of participant satisfaction. The results of the data analysis are presented in Table 14.

Table 14. Respondents' Overall Program Evaluation

Evaluation	Mean (n)	SD
Program is organized?	3.37	0.81
Program material is relevant	3.28	0.75
Program should be shorter	2.17	0.66
Program should be longer	2.24	1.02
Included enough time for discussion	3.21	0.49
Program is worthwhile overall	3.38	0.78
Sensitivity to child's needs & feelings	3.79	1.11
Gave me ideas on how to talk to my child	3.62	1.40
Help on how to talk about other parent	3.72	1.22
Do's and don'ts with my child	3.76	1.21
Suggested ways to talk to former spouse	4.07	1.03
Encouraged communication with ex-spouse	4.03	1.05

As illustrated in the following table, respondents tended to "agree" that the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program is organized and they found the program material to be relevant to divorcing parents. The program length is reasonable since the mean score for the sample suggest that respondents "disagreed" that the program is too long or too short. The mean score also suggest that sample "agreed" that enough time is allowed for discussion. In addition, the respondents "agreed" that the program is worthwhile overall.

In addition the results suggest that the program was perceived as "much" help in teaching participants how to be more sensitive to their children's needs and feelings, in giving them ideas on how to talk to their children about the divorce and about the other parent as well as what kinds of things they should and should not be doing with their children. Lastly, the program was found to be at most "very helpful" in providing suggestions on ways to talk to their former spouse about their children and encouraging them to improve the communication with their former spouse.

## Summary

As illustrated above statistically significant changes and improvements were found in the coparenting relationships and parenting practices of respondents as a result of participation in the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Included in this chapter is a discussion of the significant research findings as to the effectiveness of the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program and what the implications for social work practice, research and policy may be as a result of the research findings presented about. In addition the limitations of the study are presented and discussed.

#### Discussion

One of the questions under consideration in the program evaluation involved determining if participation in the divorce education program would yield significant differences in parent's practices, particularly reductions in parent's triangulating behaviors that place children in the middle of their parent's conflict. As the research results show, participation was associated with statistically significant changes (positive changes) in parents' behaviors. This finding is consistent with other studies and it is an important achievement given that children's well being is adversely effected by exposure to

ongoing discord between divorcing parents (Stone, Clark & McKenry 2000; Kramer & Washo 1993).

Another area under consideration in this study, sought to determine if participation in the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program was associated with decreases in interparental conflict and improvements in cooperative parenting relationships. Again, the research results show that significant change was found in both levels of cooperation and reductions in conflict.

What is most notable about the findings are the significant improvements in the participants' ability to communicate about their children and come to some agreements when making decisions about their children. Moreover, it was found that they argued less, their conversations were less tense and stressful and the underlying atmosphere was not as hostile and angry as it had been prior to participation.

This is one area in particular that the Solutions for Families program stresses. Homework and in class assignments are focused on teaching parents better communication and negotiation skills. Moreover, parents reported that they felt strongly encouraged to communicate with their former spouse about their children as a result of participation in the program.

The significant reductions in conflictual interactions discussed here are consistent with other program evaluations with high conflict populations. It is likely that the results found here are in part due to the high levels of conflict reported by participants, pre-program participation. In other words, program effectiveness has been associated to levels of conflict in much of the literature. The higher the conflict, the more effective divorce education programs are typically found to be.

Another area that bears some discussion is the change in respondents' perceptions. The parents reported that they felt better understood and supported by their former spouse as a result of participation. They also reported viewing their former spouse as more accommodating and more of a resource when it came to child rearing. Again the program emphasizes sharing feelings and needs rather than blaming when communicating with a former spouse as well as active listening techniques both of which are likely to result in these kinds of positive outcomes.

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program is effective in reducing conflict and improving the coparenting relationship and changes parenting behaviors

that are harmful to children. The program was also found to have met high standards of customer satisfaction.

#### Limitations

The research results presented above are key findings given that the mean length of divorce for the sample was approximately 4 years. This is sufficient time for patterns of conflictual interactions to become entrenched. Moreover, the majority of the program participants are court mandated to attend a divorce education program, suggesting that there remain sufficiently contentious issues surrounding child-related matters to warrant relitigation. However, given that the sample is relatively small ( $n = 33$ ) and that it is pre-experimental design, the generalizability of the results of this study might be compromised. However, they do provide supporting evidence that the program is effective, which is an important first step before a more thorough investigation is conducted.

In addition, the results of the program evaluation were derived from data extracted from self-reported measures. There is a possibility that respondents were not always truthful or objective in their reporting and this must be acknowledged. Other observable measures of parental cooperation and conflict, such as the

relitigation rates of program graduates, or child outcomes measures may provide further evidence as to the effectiveness of divorce education programs, like the one offered by Solutions for Families.

An additional limitation of this study is that it is not known whether respondents' reported improvements in their interactions with their former spouses will be retained long term. Since the current study represents only an initial exploratory study of how the educational program may or may be helpful to divorcing families there is no additional follow-up. The question as to whether program participants are able to at least maintain the same level of improvements long term remains unanswered.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The social work profession advocates evidence based, best practice or most promising models of practice. This study presents preliminary findings that the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program is effective in improving coparenting relationships. It is expected that better child outcomes of divorcing parents will follow. For those working with children and families, becoming familiar with agencies that have a divorce education program is important. Being able to refer clients to a



program that has been shown to be effective in reducing conflict and improving their coparenting relationship is even better. Staying current on what is the best or most promising programs will be important especially as the results of more formative evaluations of program effectiveness are forthcoming.

Divorce education is becoming an increasingly court-mandated requirement for divorcing parents. It is likely that the program will become a distinct field of practice, which will require a profession familiar with parent education and family life issues. Given the broad scope of knowledge and training that social work professionals receive, it is likely that as more agencies begin to offer these kinds of programs that social workers will be teaching divorce education as well as developing and evaluating such programs.

Finding or creating measures that accurately evaluate the program according to stated program goals and objectives will be important, especially as justification for legally mandating participation in divorce education programs are likely to be linked to demonstrated benefits for the communities as a whole, such as better child outcomes and reductions in relitigation rates.

Evidence showing that divorce education is effective in reducing if not eliminating these costly battles is vital to securing a policy mandating divorce education programs for all divorcing couples. Promoting the most effective divorce education program will be as important.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, it has been found that the divorce education program created and implemented by Solutions for Families is effective in reducing parental conflict, promoting cooperative parenting and reducing harmful parenting practices. It follows that once parents are able to put their children's best interest first and interact with their former spouse effectively and without animosity, that many of the harmful effects of the divorce will be mitigated.

APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE

## Survey Questionnaire

### A Study of Quality and Level of Satisfaction with Current Coparenting Relationship, and Interparental Conflict Among Ex-Partners

#### SECTION A: BACKGROUND

In this section, I would like to ask you a few questions about you. Please write or circle your answer.

- A1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ Years
- A2. What is your gender?  
1. Male  
2. Female
- A3. What is your ethnicity?  
1. White  
2. African American  
3. Hispanic  
4. Asian/Pacific Islander  
5. Native-American  
6. Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- A4. What is your education level?  
1. Less than High School  
2. Some High School  
3. High School Graduate  
4. Some college or trade school  
5. College graduate  
6. Graduate or professional degree
- A5. How old were you when you married or began this coparenting relationship?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Years
- A6. How long have you been divorced or separated from your co-parent?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Years or Months
- A7. How many children do you have from this relationship?  
\_\_\_\_\_

A8. What are the ages of these children?

\_\_\_\_\_

A9. What is your current marital status?

1. Married

5. Separated

2. Divorced

6. Single

3. Never married

7. Other (Please specify)

4. Living with someone

\_\_\_\_\_

For identifying and matching pre-test and post-test please answer the following questions by providing the information requested.

ID1. What is your middle initial? \_\_\_\_\_

ID2. What is the day of your birth? \_\_\_\_\_

ID3. What are the last 3 digits of your driver's license?

\_\_\_\_\_

## SECTION B: PRACTICES

In this section I am attempting to identify your parenting practices. Rate how often you currently engage in the following behaviors. Please circle your answers.

	never	rarely	occasionally	often	very often
B1. Criticize former spouse in front of the children	1	2	3	4	5
B2. Probe the children about the other parent's private life	1	2	3	4	5
B3. Tell the children that the other parent was to blame for the divorce	1	2	3	4	5
B4. Fight with former spouse in front of the children	1	2	3	4	5
B5. Try to get the children to see you as their favorite parent	1	2	3	4	5
B6. Try to limit the children's contact with the other parent.	1	2	3	4	5

## SECTION C: COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP

In this section I am interested in gaining an understanding as to your feelings regarding your current coparenting relationship with your ex-spouse or ex-partner. Please circle the answers that best describes your feelings in the following:

	very poorly	poorly	so/so	well	very well
C1. How well do you and your former spouse share responsibility for raising your children?	1	2	3	4	5
C2. How well do you and your former spouse communicate about your children	1	2	3	4	5
C3. How often do you and your former spouse agree when making decisions about your children?	1	2	3	4	5

## SECTION D: Conflict

In this section I am interested in your perceptions about the extent to which conflict occurs in your interactions with your former spouse. Please read each question carefully and circle the answer that best describes your current situation.

	not at all	rarely	occasionally	often	a great deal
D1. To what extent does conflict occur in your interactions with our former spouse?	1	2	3	4	5
D2. When you and your former spouse discuss parenting issues, how often does an argument result?	1	2	3	4	5
D3. How often is the underlying atmosphere one of hostility and anger?	1	2	3	4	5
D4. How often is the conversation stressful and tense?	1	2	3	4	5
D5. How often do you and your former spouse have basic differences of opinion about issues related to child rearing?	1	2	3	4	5
D6. When you need help regarding the children do you seek it from your former spouse?	1	2	3	4	5
D7. Would you say that your former spouse is a resource to you in raising the children?	1	2	3	4	5
D8. If your former spouse has needed to make a change in visiting arrangements, do you go out of your way to accommodate?	1	2	3	4	5



	not at all	rarely	occasionally	often	a great deal
D9. Does your former spouse go out of the way to accommodate any changes you need to make?	1	2	3	4	5
D10. Do you feel that your former spouse understands and is supportive of your special needs as a parent custodial, or non-custodial?	1	2	3	4	5

## Survey Questionnaire Post-Test

### PART I: Overall Program Evaluation

I am interested in finding out you think about the Solutions for Families Program. Please circle the answer that best describes to what extent you agree with the following statements:

	strongly disagree	disagree	agree	strongly agree
1. The program was organized	1	2	3	4
2. The program covered content that was relevant to the divorcing parent	1	2	3	4
3. The program should be shorter	1	2	3	4
4. The program should be longer	1	2	3	4
5. The program included enough time for discussion	1	2	3	4
6. The program was worthwhile overall	1	2	3	4

## **PART II: Program Helpfulness**

In this section I want to determine how helpful you found the program to be. Please circle the answer that best describes to what extent the program was helpful in the following areas:

	not much	somewhat	so/so	much	very much
7. The program has helped me to be more sensitive to my children's needs and feelings during the divorce	1	2	3	4	5
8. The program offered me ideas as to how to talk to my children about the divorce	1	2	3	4	5
9. The program provided guidance on how to talk to my children about their other parent	1	2	3	4	5
10. The program gave me ideas about what to do and not do with my children	1	2	3	4	5
11. The program suggested ways to talk with my former spouse about our children	1	2	3	4	5
12. The program encouraged me to improve my communication with my former spouse	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX B  
ORAL INFORMED CONSENT

## **ORAL INFORMED CONSENT**

I am asked to participate in this research study that is designed to measure the quality and effectiveness of the Solutions for Families Divorce Education Program at reducing parental conflict and promoting cooperative parenting relationships between ex-partners. This study is being conducted by Sandra Maline, graduate student of social work at California State University at San Bernardino under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, Assistant Professor at the aforementioned university. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Human Subject Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

I understand that in this study, I will be asked questions about my demographic information, my parenting practices, the level of parental conflict I am experiencing with my co-parent and my current relationship with my co-parent. I understand that the information I provide will be held strictly confidential. I also understand that I can refuse to participate in, or withdraw from this study and it will have no impact on the services I receive from this agency. I understand that I do not have to answer any question that I may not wish to answer. I understand that the survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. When I am done filling out the survey, I will be given a debriefing statement that will describe the study in more detail.

If I have any questions about the study, I can contact Dr. Janet Chang at California State University, San Bernardino, Department of Social Work, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California, 92407 or call her at (909) 880-5184.

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

The study you have just completed was designed to determine how effective the Solutions for Families' divorce education program is at reducing interparental conflict and promoting cooperative coparenting relationships. This study is also designed to provide feedback to the agency regarding the quality of services provided and the usefulness/helpfulness of the program for divorcing parents.

If you feel uncomfortable or distressed as a result of participating in the study, you are advised to contact one of the following mental health agencies:

Family Services Association of Riverside  
3634 Elizabeth Street  
Riverside, CA 92506  
(909) 686-3706

Family Services Association of San Bernardino  
1669 N. E Street  
San Bernardino, CA 92405  
(909) 886-6737 or (909) 886-6738

If you would like information regarding the findings of this study, results will be available after July 2003. You may request a copy of the result by contacting Dr. Janet Chang at California State University, San Bernardino, Department of Social Work, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California, 92407 or call her at (909) 880-5184.

APPENDIX D  
AGENCY LETTER



# SOLUTIONS FOR FAMILIES

---

P. Leslie Herold, Ph.D.

November 6, 2002

Graduate Faculty, Department of Social Work  
California State University  
San Bernardino CA 92407

Re: Ms. Sandra Maline

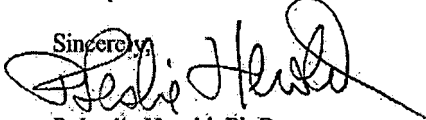
Dear Colleagues:

For your information, I have authorized the above, Ms. Maline, to conduct an outcome research study with clients of our organization who have completed, or (in the case of the control group), are eligible to complete, a thirteen hour divorce education program. The objective of this program is sensitizing parents to the needs of their children during and after divorce, as well as teaching parents very specific skills to transform their relationship, once they are divorced, into something analogous to a business partnership.

Our program has been up and running for nearly ten years. At present, about 50 parents participate each month in the program, which is offered in San Bernardino, Sun City, and Victorville. Numerous family law courts in Riverside and San Bernardino counties refer our clients. Our program has also been adopted in Utah and Colorado, with a pending adoption in North Carolina. It certainly would be helpful to us, as we expand, to have the benefit of the type of follow-up research Ms. Maline proposes to conduct.

As a matter of information, I am a retired (emeritus) psychology professor at CSUSB – having taught there continuously from 1970 to 1992. I supervised great many masters' theses, so feel well qualified to oversee Ms. Maline's data collection.

Sincerely,



P. Leslie Herold, Ph.D.  
Licensed Psychologist PSY8642

## REFERENCES

- Ahron, C. R. (1981). The continuing coparenting relationship between divorced spouses. American Orthopsychiatric, 51(3), 415-428.
- Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 111(1), 26-46.
- Arbuthnot, A., Poole, C. J., & Gordon, D. A. (1996). Use of educational materials to modify stressful behaviors in post-divorce parenting. Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 25(1/2), 117-137.
- Arditti, J. A., & Kelly, M. (2001). Fathers' perspectives of their co-parental relationships post-divorce: Implications for family practice and legal reform. Family Relations, 43, 61-67.
- Buehler, C. Betz, P., Ryan, C. M., Legg, B. H., & Trotter, B. B. (1992). Description and evaluation of the orientation for divorcing parents: Implications for postdivorce prevention programs. Family Relations, 41, 154-162).
- Bussey, M. (1998). Impact of Kids First seminar for divorcing parents: A three-year follow-up. Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 29(3/4), 129-140.
- Frieman, B. B., Garon, R. & Mandell, B. (1994). Parenting seminars for divorcing parents. Social Work, 39(5), 607-610, 167-175.
- Gentry, D. B. (1997). Including children in divorce mediation and education: Potential benefits and cautions. Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, (4), 307-315.
- Geasler, M. J., & Blaisure, K. R. (1998). A review of divorce education program materials. Family Relations, 47, 167-175.
- Hyden, M. (2001). For the child's sake: Parents and social workers discuss conflict filled parental relations after divorce. Child & Family Social Work, 6, 115-128.

- Jekielek, S. M., (1998). Parental conflict, marital disruption and children's emotional well-being. Social Forces, 76(3), 905-936.
- Kelly, J. B. (2000). Children's adjustment in conflicted marriage and divorce: A decade review of research. Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 39(8), 963-973.
- Kramer, L., & Washo, C. A. (1993). Evaluation of a court-mandated prevention program for divorcing parents: The children first program. Family Relations, 42, 179-186
- Koel, A., Clark, S. C., Straus, R. B., Whitney, R. R., & Hauser, B. B. (1994). Patterns of relitigation in the postdivorce family. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 56, 265-277.
- Krider, R. M., & Fields, J. M. (2002). Number, timing, duration of marriages, divorces: 1996. Washington DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Lehr, R., & MacMillan, P. (2001). The psychological and emotional impact of divorce: The noncustodial father's perspective. Families in Society, 82(4), 373-382).
- Madden-Derdich, D. A., & Leonard, S. A. (2000). Parental role identity and fathers' involvement in coparental interactions after divorce: Fathers' perspectives. Family Relations, 49, 311-318.
- McKenry, P. C., Clark, K. A., & Stone, G. (1999). Evaluation of a parent education program for divorcing parents. Family Relations, 48, 129-137.
- Minuchin, S., (1974). Families and family therapy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rowe, B., & Hong, G. S. (1996). The importance of non-residential parent contact for children of divorce. Consumer Interests Annual, 42, 335-340.
- Shifflett, K., & Cummings, E. M. (1999). A program for education parents about the effects of divorce and conflict on children: An initial evaluation. Family Relations, 48(1), 79-89.

Stone, G., Clark, K., & McKenry, P. (2000). Qualitative evaluation of a parent education program for divorcing parents. Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 34(1/2), 25-40).

Zibbell, R. A. (1992). A short-term, small-group education and counseling program for separated and divorced parents in conflict. Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 18(1/2), 189-196.